



Neighborhoods of Distinction

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, October 15, 2007

City Hall Diary

Early Saturday morning, October 6, I hosted a community meeting titled "Preserving Our Historic Neighborhoods: How to make your Neighborhood a Conservation Area."

Many residents have been vocal about preserving not just their individual homes, but their entire neighborhoods as historic structures and/or areas. Therefore, the purpose of the forum was to empower and inform residents by giving them options for maintaining their neighborhoods' character and ambiance.

Approximately 30 people attended my historic forum from nine different District 6 neighborhoods: Buena Vista, College Park, Garden Alameda, Palm Haven, Rose Garden, North Willow Glen, Shasta-Hanchett, Sherman Oaks and Willow Glen. I was impressed with the turnout. In addition, I received many e-mails and phone calls from residents who could not attend but were in support of preserving historic neighborhoods.

Sally Zarnowitz, Senior Planner and San Jose's Historic Preservation Officer, attended to explain the process for making a neighborhood a conservation area. In addition, she discussed the process which allows an individual homeowner to have their home listed as a historic house. These processes can be cumbersome and very costly; however, the City of San Jose does have success stories where residents and the city worked together to create historic areas so that the homes in the neighborhoods stay intact.

Much effort must be applied to have a neighborhood approved as a historic district or a conservation area. Residents must be dedicated because the work will take a lot of time and money.

The process first includes determining what area will be historic; this could be one street or several streets, etc. The historic area is determined by the residents. From there, each resident within the defined proposed historic area must have a historic survey done which

includes architecture, when the home was built, by whom and other various factors. The survey is not short; it usually looks like a booklet with several pages that can be confusing to some. Currently the work that goes into the survey must be completed by a state licensed historical consultant.

At this point in time, the city relies on consultants to do historic research. However, I would like to see the City of San Jose hire someone in-house so that we could save money on survey work. Currently, historical surveys are funded by the residents themselves, government grants or the city through Redevelopment Agency (RDA). Many of the Strong Neighborhood Initiative (SNI) areas have listed historic preservation as one of their top ten goals, therefore receiving funding through RDA to have the survey work completed. Two examples of these are Martha Gardens and the Lake House District that started the process a few years ago under former Vice Mayor Cindy Chavez's leadership.

However, SNIs only cover a small portion of San Jose. Therefore, where does this leave the rest of the neighborhoods in San Jose that want historic districts but are not privy to the RDA dollars?

It appears under San Jose's current policy, residents in many neighborhoods—such as an Eichler community in Cambrian or Sherman Oaks, Victorians in Northside, Mission and Colonial Revival in North Willow Glen or classic bungalow and Craftsman housing in Shasta-Hanchett and Willow Glen—do not have the resources to make their neighborhoods "distinctive" unless they can come up with thousands of dollars for consultant work.

These unique areas, among others, should have protection if the home owners wish to apply a historic area or district designation to them. Too many times we lose unique architecture to a major rebuild or a teardown. I appreciate and support private property rights; however, I think we need to do a better job allowing those who currently own their homes and want to make their homes historic to do so.

In an effort to describe the neighborhoods that I mentioned above, I have come up with the term "Neighborhoods of Distinction." I would like to apply this title to a possibly new policy that would add, yes, another layer of bureaucratic review (but, in my opinion, worth it) to these areas—whether it is a single street or larger area—that would not allow for major remodels or teardowns to a home arbitrarily.

As I mentioned above, I support property rights. However, property rights include being a responsible home owner. If someone chooses to

buy a home on University Avenue in the Rose Garden or Donner Drive in Cambrian, they must respect the existing community of homes. I am not quite sure why someone buys a home in a neighborhood that is already established with specific architecture, etc., only to tear down the 60-year-old home to build a new home, thus losing all the history of what the original home brought to the neighborhood. Most areas of San Jose allow a teardown or remodel to build bigger homes, like in Almaden Valley, Silver Creek, etc. I would say that most of the time this new construction does not match the street it sits on and starts to change the character of these neighborhoods that have older housing stock.

Many people choose to live in an older distinctive neighborhood because they appreciate the ambiance and history. These current home owners should have the right to have their homes placed in a historic registry if they choose. Now, one might say that by having a home and/or neighborhood called a historic area or district would limit who would buy your home at a later date. However, it could and most probably would have the opposite effect too: that is, by making a home or neighborhood historic, you will attract buyers—ones who might pay more—because of an established historic district.

In an effort to organize, mobilize and empower residents with the tools necessary to preserve historic homes and neighborhoods, I have formed a District 6 Historical Committee. The committee will be chaired by me and everyone is invited and included. The purpose of the committee is to have a gathering place for like minds—those who want to preserve history starting with their homes and neighborhoods.

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, October 15, 2007